

Architectural Impact Assessment of the Shree Gengaimmen Temple, Vusi Mzimela (Bellair Road), with regard to the widening of the road in the direction of the temple building



Shree Gangaimmen temple (right), fig tree and hall to the left (Photo: Author 2011)

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November 2011**



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1. Introduction

Debbie Whelan of Archaic Consulting was requested by Ms Verusha Nadar of Lombard and Associates/ ICANDO to prepare a short report on the potential impact of proposed road widening in the vicinity of the Albert Luthuli Hospital, Vusi Mzimela (Bellair Road), Durban, on the Shree Gengaimmen Temple, situated below the road. A proposal drawing, simply titled 'Option 1' was made available to Archaic Consulting as a basis for comment (Fig 1). A portion of this drawing was printed and scanned to provide context in this report.

The intention of this report is to establish the significance of the building as a heritage resource, and to comment on the intention to widen the road in the direction of the temple.

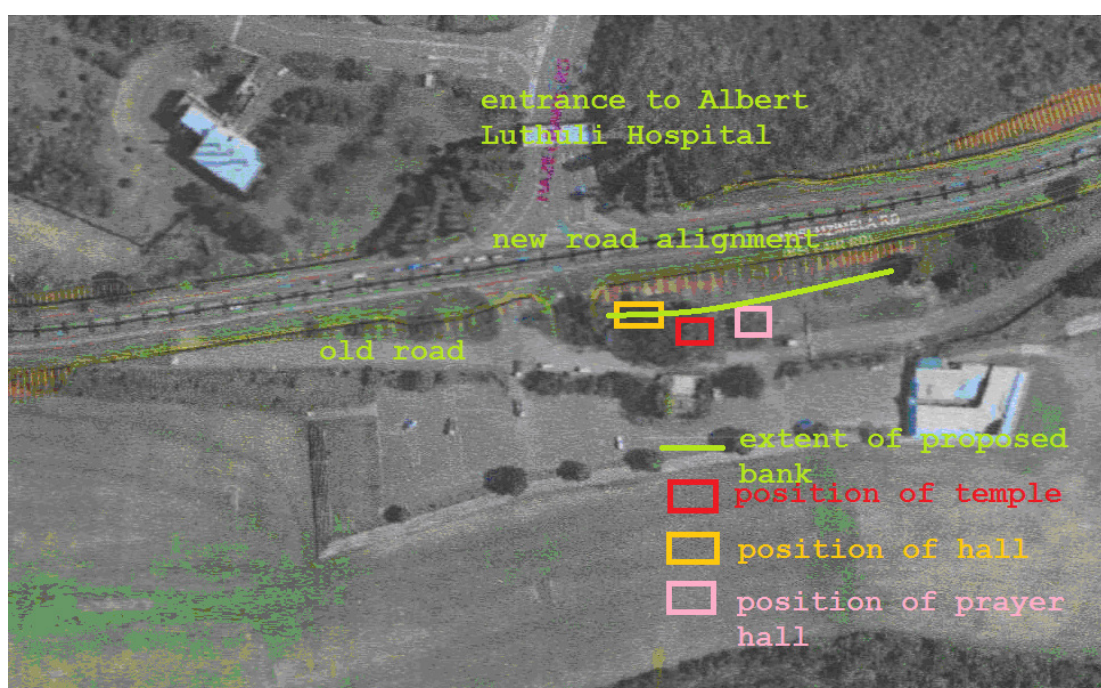


Fig 1: Scanned and annotated road widening proposal (provided Lombard and Associates/ ICANDO)

2. Methodology

A site inspection was carried out on 26 October 2011. The temple was photographed and the distance from the temple to the base of the existing bank was measured. Since it was Diwali, it was problematic to engage the worshippers in conversation, and a limited enquiry was conducted. However, Kirk White, a Durban-based architect has been working with this temple and its religious community for some time, and his expert opinion is included in the report.

Recourse was made to the scant and dated published material on temples in KwaZulu-Natal, namely Mikula *et al.*, (1982) and Grossert (1942, 1965). Aerial photographs were also consulted in establishing the position of the temple over the years.

3. Statement of significance and history

Historical significance:

Shree Gengaimmen temple is a small wood-and-iron temple that was constructed in 1909 over a holy antheap, considered a 'natural manifestation of Shiva' (Mikula et al 1982:68).¹ It is notable as it had a corrugated iron dome, which was plastered over by one AV Moodley in 1938 (Ibid: 100). It is located between two large ceremonial fig trees, and faces onto the old Bellair road which runs to the south of it. At a point in the history of this temple, its axial forecourt and *kodi* pole were removed from it, but they still stand in a relevant position.

In the more recent past, a new prayer hall was constructed to the north of it, and a hall to the south west. In the realignment of Vusi Mzimela (Bellair) Road in recent years, a glide off was made to connect the old road and the new, and the sectioned off piece is used today for taxi washing and parking.

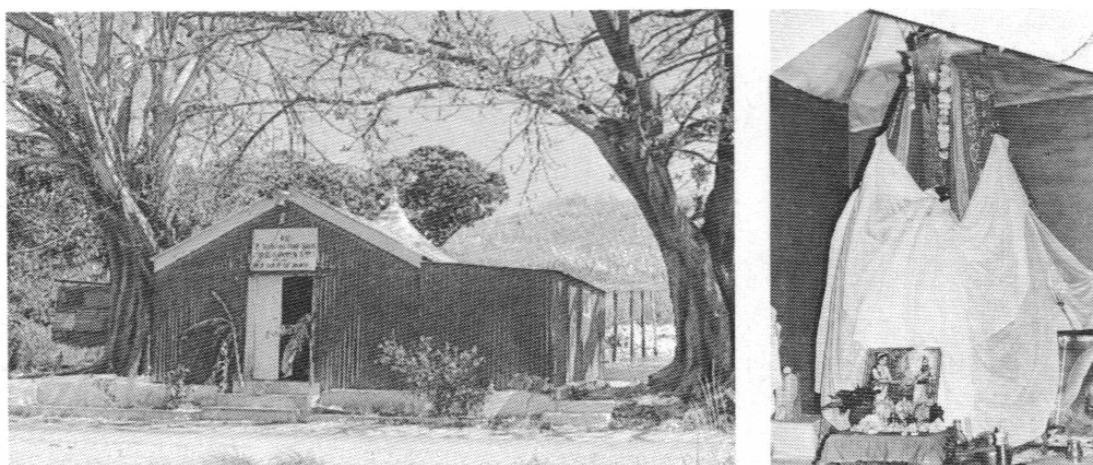


Fig 2: Photos taken ca 1982. Note landscape behind temple. A depiction of the termite mound is to the right (Mikula et al., 1982:68)

Technical significance: None known

Religious significance:

The termite mound is at the rear of the temple, signified by the yellow plastered 'dome'. This mound is 'clothed, washed and worshipped' and as such forms a central part of a communities' religious and social practise. Its constant care suggests that it forms part of a vibrant, active and continuous living culture.

¹ It is known to have replaced an earlier temple which was washed away, and the current temple contained (in 1982) items and documents from that earlier temple. White (Pers.comm) notes that informants put the termite mound as being older, having originated in 1872.

Architectural significance:

The Shree Gengaimmen temple is an unique example of wood-and-iron vernacular architecture.² It is in reasonable condition, despite constant inroads by the residents of the antheap. It is continually maintained and continuously used. Although extra accommodations have been added in the recent such as the prayer hall and the hall itself, it remains an intact and living religious site. From a heritage perspective, it is listed in terms of the Durban architectural heritage listing. White suggests that it is more important and that it should be submitted for listing as a 'Grade II Heritage Site, of Provincial Significance (White 2011:pers.comm)

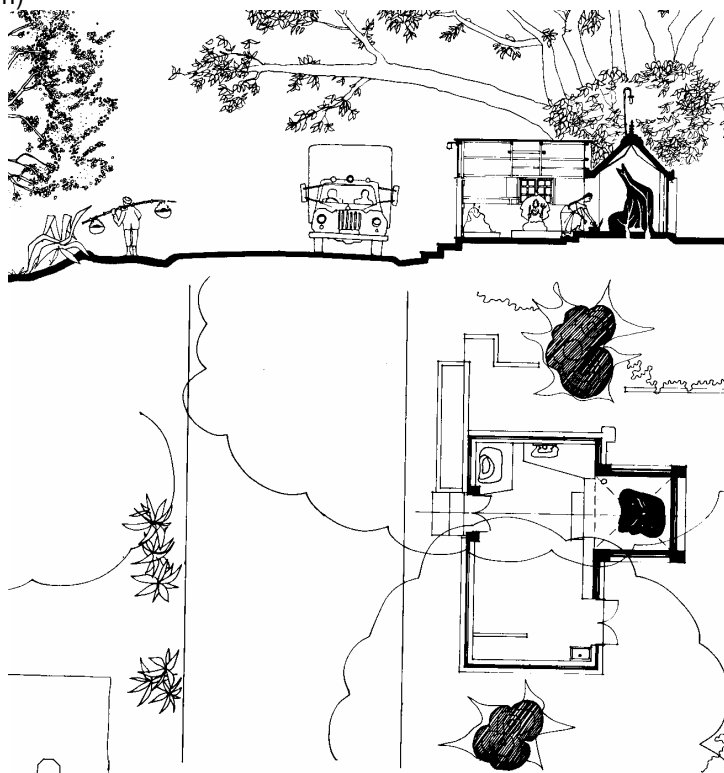


Fig 3: Plan and section of Shree Gangaimmen Temple (Mikula et al 1982:100-101)

Cultural significance:

This is high. Although the site is not located in the centre of a functioning community, and has not been for many years since removals in the area, it is a continuously functioning building. At the time of the 5 day Gangaimmen (Porridge) festival in May, some 10000 Hindu worshipers are expected (White 2011:pers.comm). Thus even though it is not a temple central to a settled community, as a representation of Shiva it is a highly significant place for Hindus in the greater Durban area. Removal of space at the rear would also remove much needed gathering space at the time of this festival.

Existing threats to the site:

- Prior to 1982, realignment of Bellair Road separated the temple from its forecourt and kodi stone
- With the current realignment, the temple lost all context with its landscape and endured the construction of a vast retaining bank some 15m distant from it.
- Today, the situation of the temple means that its religious space is compromised by parking and washing of taxis, and their music.

² White, who is familiar with a plethora of Hindu temples, suggests that this is an unique building, more so as the wood and iron is extant, whilst most other examples have been plastered over or had a brick skin added (White 2011:pers.comm).

General Statement of Significance:

Shree Gengaimmen temple	comments	local	regional	global
Historical significance	Building over 60 years	high	low	low
Technical significance	None known	low	low	low
Religious significance	An important site of worship	high	medium	low
Architectural significance	Wood-and-iron- plastered dome/ unique	high	low	low
Cultural significance	Strong association with Hindu community	high	medium	low

The Shree Gengaimmen temple is an unique example of an Hindu temple in KwaZulu-Natal. Its wood-and-iron construction, constantly repaired and maintained, houses an active termite mound which is considered the manifestation of Shiva. It is protected by law, being over the age of 60 years, but has also been listed in the Architectural Heritage listing for Durban.

Shree Gengaimmen temple is in constant use by Hindu devotees and forms a central part of the religious culture of Durban. Although modest, any further attempts to challenge it should be halted. Thus far it has lost its landscape, and its forecourt and kodi stone, as well as currently being under siege by taxis drivers parking, playing music and washing their vehicles. It is a component of an active and committed religious precinct, as well as forming part of a continuous and evolving local cultural tradition. This constitutes it as living heritage which deserves due respect and acknowledgement.

4. Impact of road widening

Spatial impact:

At the site inspection, the distance between the current base of the road fill to the rear of the temple wall was noted as being a mere 15m. This allowance is minimal (see Figures 4 and 6). The intention, given the alignment in Figure 1 of this report, is to cut less on the west side and to predominantly fill on the east.

The road widening is also likely to negatively affect the hall belonging to the temple. Although this hall is not of any architectural or historical merit, it is part of the temple grounds.



Fig 4: Rear of hall showing embankment



Fig 5: Temple dome in relation to the hall

Physical impact:

Most importantly, the vibration from any road widening moving towards the temple is likely to affect the very core of the temple: the termite mound. Should this feature disappear, so does an unique building, an unique tradition and a vital cultural and religious practise that has developed around it and is part of the fabric of Durban.

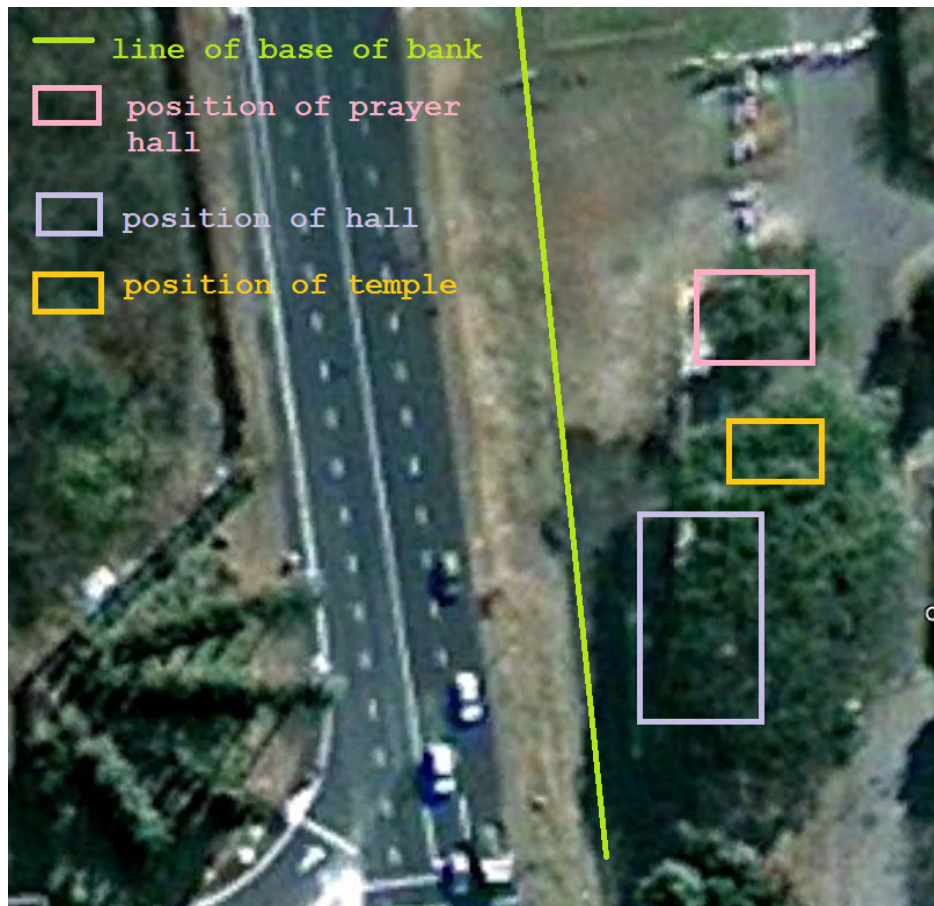


Fig 6: Google Earth image showing proximity of existing bank to approximate positions of the building

4. Conclusions:

Given the significance of the Shree Gengaimmen Temple, and its part of a vital and continuous religious and cultural heritage, any further roadworks which affect it materially should not be carried out. New works are more than likely to compromise its already fragile structure, as well as compromise the precinct space which has already been drastically affected and truncated.

It should also be respected that the core of this building, the termite mound, is considered by the temple worshipers to be the very essence of the Goddess. Further earthworks are likely to affect the stability of this mound, and thus remove the core of worship from the devotees.

It is HIGHY RECOMMENDED that the option of widening the road in the direction of Shree Gengaimmen temple be abandoned. Space, although with more complex access, is available on the other (hospital side) of Vuzi Mzimela (Bellair) Road.

5. References:

Grossert, J. 1965 Hindu Temples of Natal in *South African Architectural Record* Vol 50 no 7
 Grossert, J. 1942. *Hindu Temples of Natal*
 University of Natal: Unpublished M.A.-Fine Arts thesis
 Mikula, P.,Kearney, B., Harber, R. 1982. Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa. Durban. Hindu Temple Publications

Kirk White (Architect) pers.comm 17/11/11